



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)

Hearing on
“Democracy and Human Rights Abuses in Russia: No End in Sight”
Wednesday, April 26, 2017
124 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Opening Statement of Senator Ben Cardin, Ranking Member

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing on Russia and particularly the opportunity to focus on violations of fundamental freedoms and the repression of democracy, the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, and free and fair elections. These abuses are directly related to the acts of aggression that have been the focus of so much congressional inquiry this year already.

A few weeks ago, we saw **Russian citizens demonstrate** across the length and breadth of the Russian Federation in an effort to end the systemic corruption that corrodes the everyday lives of people from all walks of life. Remarkably, an estimated 30,000 truckers in 60 cities are continuing to protest a road tax collected by a private firm with ties to President Putin. In a country where peaceful protests in Bolotnaya Square were so severely punished a few years ago, these are striking manifestations against corruption and for the rule of law, independent institutions of accountability, and human dignity.

These Russians ask no less of Russia than what Russia itself committed to in the Helsinki Final Act. In fact, it was in Moscow that the OSCE participating States explicitly acknowledged that “issues relating to human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law are of international concern, as respect for these rights and freedoms constitutes one of the foundations of the international order. They categorically and irrevocably declare that the commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension of the [OSCE] are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the **internal affairs** of the State concerned.”

I am particularly heartened that Vladimir Kara-Murza can be with us here today.

When Mr. Kara-Murza testified before Congress in June 2015, he said,

Our friends in the West often ask how they can be helpful to the cause of human rights and democracy in Russia and the answer to this is very simple. Please stay true to your values. We are not asking for your support. It is our task to fight for democracy and rule of law in our country.

The only thing we ask from Western leaders is that they stop supporting Mr. Putin by treating him as a respectable and worthy partner and by allowing Mr. Putin's cronies to use Western countries as havens for their looted wealth.

Vladimir, your courage and commitment is an inspiration and we are grateful that you are here to speak for others **who have fallen in the struggle to speak truth to power.**

Tragically, those numbers continue to increase. Just a few days ago, a St. Petersburg journalist succumbed to his injuries after being beaten into a coma on March 9. His case is a reminder that many attacks have resulted in not only the loss of life, but in some cases have left people maimed or disabled for life.

I also hope our witnesses will speak to the alarming reports we have received of large-scale and brutal attacks, some resulting in murder, **targeting gay men in Chechnya.** These attacks seem to reflect a horrific intersection of the government's hostility against LGBT people and the symbiotic relationship between President Putin and Chechnya's most notorious thug, Ramzan Kadyrov. I am also concerned for the safety of the two journalists, Elena Milashina and Irina Gordienko, who broke the story of this wave of violence and have been threatened for their courageous reporting.

Mr. Chairman, I also welcome the opportunity to focus on the political prisoners and others detained in violation of Principal VII of the Helsinki Final Act – the right of people to know and act upon their human rights. The cases of these “P-VII Detainees” have been well documented by *Memorial*, the Russian civil society organization established to document the crimes of Soviet repression. If I may, Mr. Chairman, I would like to include in the record *Memorial's* **list of political prisoners** which was submitted at the OSCE's Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw in September. I regret that Secretary Tillerson did not meet with independent civil society groups like *Memorial* when he visited Moscow, forgoing an opportunity to communicate U.S. support for an open and democratic Russia.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today.